

4. The three divisions of the Logic: Being, Essence & Notion

After this long preamble, let us now turn to the Logic itself, but rather than simply start from the beginning and working line by line through to the end, it is best to read Hegel by beginning with the whole triadic structure of the book, and then moving inwards to follow the logical argument step by step only once the overall structure is clear.

The Logic is made up of three sections: The Doctrine of Being, the Doctrine of Essence and the Doctrine of the Notion. Let's start with Being.

Being is the concept in-itself, not yet conscious of itself

Firstly, where necessary we should put out of our minds for the moment, any preconceptions we may have about the meaning of the concept of 'Being', and any other of the concepts we will come to in turn, which we may have learnt from the Phenomenologists or Existentialists. The subject matter of these theories is quite different from that of Hegel's Logic and it can be very confusing if you try to follow Hegel's argument with the concepts of Phenomenology or Existentialism in mind. It is another one of those kaleidoscopic lenses which just cause confusion.

In the days when Hegel became a professor, professors of philosophy were required to present a Logic, a Metaphysics and a Philosophy of Nature. 'Ontology', the study of Being, theories about the kinds of thing which can exist and the nature of existence, normally falls under Metaphysics. The series of lectures that Hegel developed for his Ontology became what we now know as his 'Doctrine of Being', the first part of the Logic. This illustrates the observation that Hegel replaced Ontology with Logic.

From what we have already said we know that Hegel sees that the Logic arises as the truth of the *Phenomenology*, and that the Logic expresses the pure essentialities of the phenomenology, that is, the truth of manifest spirit. Further, we know that for the Logic he is looking for a concept which presupposes nothing outside of itself, a concept which imports no content from outside, rests upon no axioms. One can't help but be reminded of Descartes's search for a proposition whose truth and certainty rests on nothing else, and is in that same sense,

presuppositionless. But Hegel's solution is different because he has already, in the *Phenomenology*, elaborated the nature of consciousness, so he does not look for his starting point in inward, personal contemplation, but rather in the nature of manifest spirit.

The outcome of Hegel's search for a starting point for his philosophy is Ontology, but instead of beginning with a list of the various kinds of things which can be deemed to be, he conducted a logical critique of the *concept of Being* itself, and with a dialectical unfolding of the contents of the concept of Being.

I should mention here as an aside that all Hegel's major works have the same structure: he identifies the simple concept or notion which marks the unconditioned starting point for the given science, and then he applies the method, the model for which is given in the Logic, in order to elaborate what is implicit in the given concept; he develops "the peculiar internal development of the thing itself."

In the case of the Philosophy of Nature, he begins from the concept of space, and claims to unfold the philosophy of Nature through critique of the concept of Space; the Philosophy of Right, likewise, has the form of a logical critique of the concept of *Right*; Right itself arises as the truth of the Subjective Spirit, which is the first part of the Philosophy of Spirit and his claim is that *Spirit* is the truth of Nature, and appears in the form of Soul. The science of the Soul for Hegel is anthropology. This is how Hegel conceives of philosophy as a "circle of circles."

So, the Logic begins with a critique of Being, what is contained in the concept of 'Being'. The Logic is really the study of concepts; so, the Concept is the truth of Being, whilst Being is the Concept still 'in itself'. The Third Book of the Logic is the Doctrine of the Notion (or Concept which is same thing), that is, the Concept for itself. But in the Doctrine of Being, the Concept is still just 'in itself'.

This concept of 'in itself' is derived from Kantian philosophy, meaning what the thing is independently of and prior to our knowledge of it. Now we are talking about shapes of consciousness, so we mean the concept under conditions where the shape of conscious has not yet unfolded and become conscious of itself. The "yet" implies of course that should the shape of conscious which is "in itself" further develop, then it may become *self-conscious*. But it is not yet self-conscious.

So we have something possibly contradictory here. A shape of consciousness which is not consciousness of itself, but may become so. So we must have here an *observer* perspective, because if we are talking about a shape of consciousness which is not self-conscious, then the only terms we have in order to describe it are observer terms.

But what does it amount to? It is an idea or a form of social practice or a project which cannot yet even be described as emergent. People are acting in a certain way, but they are not conscious of acting in any such particular way. So we have for example, people who have been kicked off their land and have found a living by selling their labour by the hour, but they still think of themselves as peasants, who unfortunately have fallen on hard times perhaps, but they have no concept of themselves as proletarians, for example.

So this is what Being is, and we will see presently that Hegel is able to demonstrate the nature of Being by a critique of the concept of Being.

If there is to be some thing amidst the infinite coming and going, the chaos of existence, the simplest actual thing that can be is a Quality, something that persists amidst change. And if we ask what it is that changes while it remains of the same quality, what changes when the thing still remains what it is, then this is what we call Quantity. But a thing cannot indefinitely undergo quantitative change and remain still what it is, retain the same quality; at some point, a quantitative change amounts to a change in Quality, and this Quantitative change which amounts to a Qualitative change, the unity of Quality and Quantity, we call the Measure of the thing.

Thus there are three grades of Being: Quality, Quantity and Measure. We apply these categories to things that we regard as objects, the business of the positivist sociologist, the observer. Even a participant in a not yet emergent social change or sociological category, has to play the role of sociologist to be conscious of it.

So unlike with Kant, the thing-in-itself is not existent in some yonder, beyond the limits of knowledge, but rather is something which is *not yet* self-conscious. There is no hard line between appearance and the thing-in-itself. What is in-itself today, may make an appearance tomorrow. What the empirical sociologist describes today, may speak for itself tomorrow. Like what Betty Friedan called “the problem that has no name.”

So that’s Being, existence which is *in itself*, not yet self-conscious. We will see below how Hegel goes about demonstrating the dynamics of a movement which is in itself, through critique of the concept of Being.

Essence is reflection

Next we come to the Doctrine of Essence. Essence for Hegel is not quite what it means for other people. When feminists talk about “essentialism” for example, meaning believing that women differ from men because of what is in their biological nature, or when the ancient philosophers debated what was the “essence” of this or that thing as opposed to what was contingent or inessential. For Hegel, Essence is this process of “peeling the layers off the onion,” of searching for what is behind appearance, of probing reality, but in no way did Hegel think that there was some fixed end point to that process; Essence is just that *process* of probing the in-itself and bringing to light what was behind.

Essence is reflection. So if we have something going on in the world, maybe or maybe not, some emergent project, some emergent new form of social practice, or some new thought that is doing the rounds, maybe not yet corresponding to any apparent change in social practice, some new art form, some detectable change in fashion, then this may come to light in terms of meaningless observations, measurement of quantity and quality, but people try to make sense of it, people reflect on it. And this is what we’re interested in.

When people reflect on things, they do so only with the aid of what they already know. So reflection is a good term. It is new Being, reflected in the mirror of old concepts. It’s like what Marx was talking about in the “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”:

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.” (18th Brumaire, I)

So Essence is a whole process, which begins with the simplest kind of reflection on quantitative and qualitative changes, the discovery of difference and eventually leads up to a new concept, an adequate concept befitting a unique form of social practice. The final emergence of the new concept is a kind of leap; it can’t be given by any kind of formula because the notion arises out of this process of reflecting what is new in an *old mirror*. But Hegel outlines the Logical stages through which the genesis of a new concept can go, broadly a series of counterposed propositions, a contradictory struggle of Fors and Againsts, an ‘on the one hand and on the other hand’. In the course of its genesis, the new phenomenon, if such it proves to be,

penetrates and sheds light on everything else, every other aspect of life, summoning it up for an opinion on the matter.

The grades of Essence are as follows.

Firstly, we have Reflection, or Reflection into Self. The process of Reflection is described as the dialectic of Matter and Form. This means that at first a quantitative-qualitative change which oversteps the boundary of Measure and announces itself as a new Thing; the question is: is this a new Form of the same material or a completely new kind of material? Are the daily demonstrations in Belgrade just expressions of discontent or is this an organised campaign in preparation for a coup?

At bottom, Form and Matter are the same thing. As a form of self-consciousness this is the dilemma as to whether you are just doing the same old thing in a new way, or whether this is a new thing showing itself in the shape of an old thing. The idea of a matter is a substrate that underlines different forms; wherever you propose a different *kind* of matter, it can be reduced to the same old matter in a different form. "Matter" is just an abstraction.

The second division of Essence is Appearance. Appearance is the dialectic of Form and Content. This can be seen as the struggle of the new content to find a form adequate to itself; it is manifested in the succession of a whole series of forms, each bringing forward new content and ultimately proving to be inadequate to its content.

The third division of Essence is Actuality, which is the dialectic of Cause and Effect. The entity arises as the effect of something, but then it is also in its turn, the cause of things. Each effect is also a cause, just as much as every cause is also an effect. As the cause-effect chain extends out everywhere in all directions until it feeds back on itself, this culminates in the notion of Reciprocity, that everything together forms a complex of mutually causing effects all inseparable from one another. Simple propositions turn out to have ramifications when they come under criticism, simple proposals become concretized and a new concept becomes actualized. But still remains a form of reflection, and even the infinite network of cause and effect, and the increasing adequacy of form and content, do not yet constitute a notion of what it is.

This is the process of a new type of self-consciousness struggling to find itself, so to speak, still testing out all the old categories, trying to find a fit. The process of genesis is always the struggle between opposing propositions, like Empiricism and Rationalism, two opposite currents in the history of philosophy, but although their

struggle is characteristic of just certain periods of history, it never goes away; to this very day a new problem in science will find itself rationalist and its empiricist proponents. The struggle between Empiricism and Rationalism was overtaken by the struggle between Dogmatism and Skepticism, which moves into the limelight. That's the nature of Essence: a series of oppositions which persist, but as one moves into the limelight it pushes others to the side. It is the genesis of a Notion out of its abstract Being; it is the truth of Being; it is what is essential in the coming-and-going of Being, Being stripped of what is inessential.

The Notion is the concept conscious of itself

The third part of the Logic is the Doctrine of the Notion. Notion is a translation of the German word *Begriff* which is also translated as 'concept'.

As an aside, we should take notice of how Hegel uses the word 'abstract'. By 'abstract' Hegel means undeveloped, lacking in connections with other things, poor in content, formal and so on, as opposed to 'concrete', which means mature, developed, having many nuances and connections with other concepts, rich in content. He does *not* use the words abstract and concrete to indicate something like the difference between mental and material, or any such thing.

The Doctrine of the Notion begins with an *abstract* notion, and the process of the Notion is that it gets more and more *concrete*.

Think of the Notion as a new idea, like at some point in 1968, somewhere in the US, a woman reflecting on the relation between the position of women and the position of Black people, coined the word 'sexism'. This was a new idea, in everything that had gone before since people like Mary Wollstonecraft talked about the impact of gender roles on women in the 18th century, this idea had been in gestation, but it hadn't quite crystallized. Or take Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity; when Einstein proposed it in 1905, it was a complete break from anything that had been talked of before, but it also resolved a heap of problems that physicists had been facing up till then. So these are examples of an abstract Notion: projects, simple ideas that correspond to a new shape of consciousness, a new form of social practice along with its representations and self-consciousness.

There is not a gradual shaping of this new abstract Notion in Essence; it comes as a complete break. It is like the judgment of Solomon, settling the argument with something that really seems to come from left field. It is a breakthrough which launches a new science, out of the confusion that preceded it.

The Notion is the unity of Being and Essence, because it makes sense of the original observations, the facts of the matter, as well as all the disputes and alternative explanations. In that sense it is a negation of the negation, and immediate perception is reconstructed on the basis of the new conception.

The Notion is also the truth of Essence, in that it is what emerges as the final conclusion which settles the series of disputes which make up Essence. The Notion, the *concept* of the thing, comes closer to what would normally be meant by the 'essence of a thing'; Hegel uses the word 'essence' for the whole process, and the truth of that process, of 'essence', he calls the Notion.

Being and Essence, which are together what Hegel calls 'The Objective Logic', make up the *genesis* of the 'Subjective Logic', which is the Doctrine of the Notion.

The first section of the Notion is Subjectivity, or the Subject. And here for the first time we get a glimpse of Hegel's conception of the subject: it is not an individual person in any sense at all, but a simple element of consciousness arising from social practices which implicate the whole community, reflected in language, the whole social division of labour and so on.

In a sense, for Hegel, there is only one concept. But that one concept, the Absolute Idea, is only the outcome of a whole, long-drawn-out historical process, a process in which different individual concepts are posited at first as abstract notions, and then enter into a process of concretization in which they merge with everything else, take on all the implications of their own existence. The Absolute Idea, which is the final product, is the result of the mutual concretization of all the abstract notions, the objectification of each one on every other. In this conception, issues come up about Hegel having a master narrative, about totalising everything, and of practicing a kind of philosophical colonialism. To get Hegel's whole system, then you do have to push this idea through to the extreme so you get the Absolute Idea externalizing itself as Nature and Spirit proving to be the truth of Nature and so on, all of which is a kind of philosophical theology. But we can get all we need out of Hegel's Logic without swallowing the Absolute Idea; the Absolute Idea can be taken as a kind of hypothetical end point, a kind of Utopia which can be used as a signpost, but should not be taken as something real.

The first section of the Notion, the Subject, is very complex and very important. Think of it for the moment in terms of the pure essentialities of a single *unit* or 'molecule' of a shape of consciousness.

The structure of the Subject is Individual-Universal-Particular, which are referred to as *moments* of the Notion. That is, the subject entails a specific, all-sided relation

between the consciousness of finite, mortal *individuals*, the *particular* forms of on-going activity and social relations entailed in the relevant social practice, and the *universal*, eternal products through which the Subject is represented.

The divisions of the Subject are the Notion, the Judgment (which is a connection between two moments) and the Syllogism (in which a judgment is mediated by one of the three moments).

The process of the Doctrine of the Notion is the abstract notion becoming more and more concrete. This process of concretization takes place through *objectification* of subjectivity, that is, through the subject-object relation. The first thing to grasp about the Object, which is the second division of the Doctrine of the Notion, is that the Object may be other Subjects, Subjects which are Objects in relation to the Subject or Subjects which have become thoroughly objectified. Objectification is not limited to the construction of material objects or texts; it's a bit like 'mainstreaming', or being institutionalized. The process of development of the Subject is a striving to transform the Object according to its own image, but in the process the Subject itself is changed and in the process of objectification becomes a part of the living whole of the community.

The subject-object relation goes through three stages, the mechanical relation in which the subject and object are indifferent to one another and impact one another externally, the chemical relation, in which there is an affinity between subject and object, and the object presents itself as processes rather than things. The third division of the Object is Teleology, where the subject-object relation becomes a life process in which each is to the other both a means and an end.

The unity of Subject and Object, the third and last grade of the Doctrine of the Notion, is the Idea. The Idea can be understood as the whole community as an intelligible whole, it is the summation of the pure essentialities of a complete historical form of life. It is the logical representation of Spirit, or of the development and life of an *entire community*, in the form of a concrete concept.

Again, it is not necessary to swallow this idea whole. If you don't accept that a community, at any stage in history whatsoever, can be encompassed in the single concept, then this doesn't invalidate the whole of the Logic, of which the Absolute Idea is the end point.

So that in brief summary is the series of concepts making up the Logic. To complete this initial review, let us make a couple of points of overview before we start going through these concepts one step at a time.

Being and Essence constitute the genesis of the Notion

The first point to consider is the difference between the two “Volumes” of the Logic: Objective Logic – Being and Essence, and the Subjective Logic. The Objective Logic is the genesis of the Subjective Logic, genesis in the sense of being the process leading to the birth of the Notion. So the Objective Logic logically precedes the Subjective Logic, it is the objective (i.e., not self-conscious) process which precedes the emergence of the Notion as a self-conscious abstract notion, its pre-history. On the other hand, the Subjective Logic is the process of development of the Subject itself, that is, its successive concretization, beginning from the first simple, undeveloped embryo of a new science or social movement or whatever.

So we should take note here of what each of the two “volumes” correspond to in Hegel’s conception of science and history. Let us take the Philosophy of Right as an example. The concept of Right is here the Notion of the science, corresponding to the starting point of the Subjective Logic, and it is from the Notion of the science, namely, Right, that the science makes its beginning. The Philosophy of Right then corresponds to the Doctrine of the Notion. Hegel makes the key distinction by saying that in the Philosophy of Right, he is concerned with “the peculiar internal development” of Right, and this means that he “must develop the idea [of Right], which is the reason of an object, out of the conception.” So the Philosophy of Right is not constructed as a history of right, either positive or idealised; once the concept of Right has come into the world and implanted itself as the resolution of a range of pre-existing conflicts and conditions, then its future course is an unfolding of what is to be found in the conception itself.

The three books of the Logic each constitute a distinct science – Ontology, the science of Being; Essence, the science of Reflection; and the science of the Concept. Each begins with a simple, abstract concept and unfolds the content from that conception.

This *unfolding* of what is in a conception, is quite distinct from the process of *genesis* which led up to the creative leap in which the conception is born. Once the situation has produced a conception, it is relatively unimportant how it came about. So this is a very important corrective to the conception of Hegel as an historical thinker. Hegel did not commit the genetic fallacy. It is possible to understand the various conflicting forces which lay behind a thing coming into being, but the scientific study of *the thing itself* means to grasp it as a *concept* (which a study of its historical origins contributes to but is not equal to) and then to determine what follows from, or unfolds from the concept.

So the starting point of a science is the Notion which forms the subject of the science, not Being. This is worth mentioning because there is a widespread fallacy about the relation between Marx's Capital and Hegel's Logic. Some writers have put Capital up against the Logic, and in an effort to match them, start by equating the commodity relation with Being, on the basis that the commodity relation is the "simplest relation" or on the basis that the commodity relation is immediate. But the first thing to be done in a science, according to Hegel (and Marx followed Hegel in this), is to form a Notion of the subject, the simplest possible relation whose unfolding produces the relevant science. In the case of Capital, this abstract notion, the germ of capital, is the commodity relation. In the case of the Philosophy of Right, it was the relation of Abstract Right, that is private property. The problem of the origins of value or of the commodity relation is a different question, and Marx demonstrates his familiarity with the Doctrine of Essence in the third section of Chapter One, where the money-form is shown to emerge out of a series of relations constituting historically articulated resolutions of the problem of realizing an expanded division of labour.

Both the Objective Logic and the Subjective Logic begin from a kind of simplicity. In the case of the Objective Logic, the simple starting point is *unreflective immediacy*, which immediately gives way to a new immediacy; in the case of the Subjective Logic, the simple starting point is an idea, an *abstract concept*, a relation which is the outcome of a long process of gestation and remains from beginning to end the subject of the science. The science is not mindless of externalities, and in trying to understand the necessity of the thing, the writer will be mindful of all the relevant events, relations and so on, but these relations go to forming a more and more concrete conception of the thing. In the case of studying the history of emergence of a thing, the point is to learn from the mistakes and conflicts and false starts of the past in order to arrive at a simple and clear concept of the thing which is to form the starting point of the science. This will entail, probably, sifting through a mass of documentary material and critically working over it to arrive at the simply starting point from which it can all be reconstructed.

Each division has a distinct form of movement or development

Each of the three books of the Logic constitute a self-standing science, beginning with an abstract concept, and unfolding what is contained in that notion. The three sciences are the science of being, the science of reflection and the science of the concept. Each of these three sciences manifest a distinct form of movement.

In Being, the form of movement is *seriality*. That is, a concept passes away and has no more validity, it is then replaced by another, which in turn passes away. It's just one damn thing after another, a transition from one to the next to the next.

In Essence, in the passage from one relation to another, the former relation does not pass away but remains, although pushed to the background, so the form of movement is *diversity*.

In the Notion, the movement is *development*, with each new relation incorporated into the concept and all the former relations merged with it.

Hegel puts it this way in the *Shorter Logic*:

“The onward movement of the notion is no longer either a transition into, or a reflection on something else, but **Development**. For in the notion, the elements distinguished are without more ado at the same time declared to be identical with one another and with the whole, and the specific character of each is a free being of the whole notion.

“Transition into something else is the dialectical process within the range of Being: reflection (bringing something else into light), in the range of Essence. The movement of the Notion is development: by which that only is explicit which is already implicitly present.” (*Shorter Logic* §161)

In each Book, there are different forms of *reference* between the opposites. Hegel describes the difference between Essence and Being thus:

“In the sphere of Essence one category does not pass into another, but refers to another merely. In Being, the form of reference is purely due to our reflection on what takes place: but it is the special and proper characteristic of Essence. In the sphere of Being, when somewhat becomes another, the somewhat has vanished. Not so in Essence: here there is no real other, but only diversity, reference of the one to its other. The transition of Essence is therefore at the same time no transition: for in the passage of different into different, the different does not vanish: the different terms remain in their relation. ...

“In the sphere of Being the reference of one term to another is only implicit; in Essence on the contrary it is explicit. And this in general is the distinction between the forms of Being and Essence: in Being everything is immediate, in Essence everything is relative.” (*Shorter Logic* §111n)

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